The Ethics of Advertising

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> – *Most excellent and approved Dentifrice to scour and cleanse the Teeth, making them white as ivory, preserves from the Tooth-ach, so that being constantly used, the Parties using it are never troubled with the Tooth-ach; It fastens the Teeth, sweetens the breath, and preserves the Gums and Mouth from cankers and Imposthumes. . . .*[1]

An advertisement from the middle of the seventeenth century which but for the language might be of today: the modern magic product of the genre also fights tooth decay, keeps 'tooth-ach' at bay, cleans your breath while it cleans your teeth, and does wonders for your smile. As then, so now – dental health and social acceptability are by happy coincidence both assured the user. Who would not be persuaded?

Advertising has a long history,[2] and it is usual to refer to a three thousand year old papyrus from Thebes offering the reward of a 'whole gold coin' for the return of a runaway slave called Shem; not to mention town criers in ancient Athens, and publicity for gladiators' contests on the walls of Pompeii. But, as Raymond Williams says, 'If by advertising we mean what was meant by Shakespeare and the translators of the Authorized Version – the processes of taking or giving notice of something – it is as old as human society, and some pleasant recollections from the Stone Age could be quite easily devised'.[3]

An announcement by way of a text, assisted perhaps by a picture, aimed at conveying information – this was and is the essence of the advertiser's method. But a pedlar of wares or of a point of

1. Quoted in Raymond Williams, *Problems in Materialism and Culture,* London 1980, p. 171. Cf. Gillian Dyer, *Advertising as Communication,* London and New York 1982. The latter is a useful introduction, and should be especially helpful for group study work. A recent informative, sometimes provocative, study is Eric Clark's *The Want Makers,* London 1988.
2. The following summary of the history is based on Dyer 15-37, Williams 171-181, *Encyclopedia Britannica* [EB] (1978), Macr. I, art. 'Advertising'.
3. *Op. cit.,* p. 170.

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view is rarely content to inform merely, and he or she will try also to persuade. The pictures on the walls of Pompeii attempted to attract people to attend the contests, the dentifrice maker wants us to buy his paste. Today's media of social communication have extended not just the scope for diffusion of information but also the possibilities for persuading.

THE ADMAN COMETH

The modern development in those islands began with the emergence of the newspaper. Print offered the chance to add argument and suggestion to information in the text of announcements concerning goods and services, and the widespread dissemination of the papers ensured a vastly expanded clientele. it was possible too, of course, to utilise the journals and periodicals in aid of political or other causes, and the seeds of the development of the media campaign were sown. By 1660 *The London Gazette* was ready to publish the first advertisement supplement, the editor being no longer willing to clutter the main paper with advertisers' texts. By the time the first daily newspaper in Britain, *The Daily Courant*, appeared in 1702, advertising practice was well established, and the subsequent imposition of an advertisement tax aimed at curbing the activities of the press did not much diminish the volume of advertising in papers and magazines.

Two particular developments contributed to the subsequent flourishing of advertisement in the public press – the spread of education and improvements in transportation by land and sea. Increasing literacy meant an increase in the numbers of the public who were open to information and persuasion, improvements in methods and range of transportation offered prospect of a greatly extended circulation. And with the industrial revolution the stage was set for the emergence of advertising as a characteristic feature of free-market economic systems. In the new factories new technologies made for an expanded productivity: there were more goods to sell, and so more customers needed. Advertising brought the new goods to the notice of potential customers, and tried to induce them to buy.[4] But it was itself in process of becoming a business, as the institution of publisher's agent, responsible for the selling of advertisement space, was gradually transformed into the 'agency', the *raison d'etre* of which was the service of the advertiser.

So it was that by the beginning of this century the groundwork for advertising's contribution to the commerce and industry of our time was fully laid. And so was the basis for modern ethical concern. For in addition to the relatively straightforward issue of the

4. But cf. Williams, 177, 178.

truthfulness of an advertiser's information there would be increasing question of the propriety of his techniques of persuasion; and there was now also a cluster of questions arising from the significance of advertising in western economic systems.

Not that the practice of advertising had been hitherto viewed without qualm. Early press advertisement in England, for example, had lent itself to a contemporary fad for quackery in medicine, especially in the aftermath of the great plague of 1665. A hundred years later Samuel Johnson, sceptical of the methods of the advertisers, said 'Promise, large promise, is the soul of an advertisement'. In 1859 a local newspaper complained that 'Advertising is resorted to for the purpose of introducing inferior articles into the market'. Carlyle thought that advertising was against nature, or at least ungentlemanly.

Of course, advertising's potential for good or ill was greatly extended through the development of radio, the cinema and television. Although radio was for long the most generally available of the three it has not played as influential a role as television has: in many countries the radio is government-owned, and advertising nonexistent or confined. It is only to be expected that a mass medium which combines visual with aural communication should offer the immeasurable scope that television has given the advertiser.

Closely related to the work of advertising goods and services is the business of what is called 'public relations'. Individuals – in the world of entertainment, for example, or in politics – and groups such as business corporations or other institutions procure the services of an agency so as to 'market' themselves through the creation and projection of a favourable 'image'. Television was first used in a presidential campaign in the United States in 1952, with brief commercials on behalf of Dwight Eisenhower. The simplicity of the format (the candidate answering the question of an 'ordinary citizen') was matched by the innocence of the content, but the ad's popularity hinted at its promise. Before long a television debate between the candidates became a standard campaign device and, more importantly, there had begun to evolve a highly sophisticated deployment of production techniques for the enhancement of a candidate's image or the destruction of that of his opponent. We saw the adman's skill at work in the U.S. presidential election last November, and we are regularly reminded these days, in reviews of her decade in office, of what Saatchi and Saatchi have done for Mrs. Thatcher.

Central in the business of advertising today is the role of the advertising agency. Mention has been made above of the origin of this institution in brokerage in advertising-space on behalf of the

publishers of papers and magazines. Before the end of the nineteenth century, however, in the United States and in England especially, agencies were firmly at the service of the advertiser, and nowadays the major agencies perform a vast range of tasks on the advertiser's behalf, from devising marketing and advertising strategies to composing advertisement 'copy'.

At the heart of the agency's work is research – of marketing possibilities, of the character of the various media and their methods, and of their own and others' advertising strategies. Since so much advertising is done through mass media it is natural to think of it as aimed at 'the masses', but this is a misconception. 'Any population . . . is composed of different individuals with different needs and wants, different lifestyles and different tastes. The most efficient strategy is thus to single out those segments of the population who are the best prospects, and address the advertising to them'.[5]

This principle of segmentation is basic in both marketing and advertising, as advertisers try to discover who is to be addressed. Standard demographic factors – age, sex, occupation, income, family size – are used, but so nowadays are psychological indications such as personality traits and even unconscious motivations. A recent television programme examined new measuring techniques based on lifestyles: it showed, among others, the 'avant-Guardian'. 'She reads the *Guardian* and bought Peter Carey's *Oscar and Lucinda* last year. She buys own-label soap powder from Saintsbury's and chicken tikka from Marks and Spencer. She doesn't buy South African products. She does buy fruit and fibre breakfast cereal, yoghurt and skimmed milk. She watches the food and drink programme, *4 What It's Worth* and recently Bertolucci's *The Conformist*. She drives a Renault 5. Rive Gauche is her perfume.'[6] (She has, of course, her Irish counterpart, and it would be interesting to compare and contrast.)

The results of this research, together with the answers to other questions – as to the nature of the message, the type of medium to be used, and the budget – are the basis of advertising strategy. The *Listener* piece aptly characterises the agency's task: '[Agencies] know what avant-Guardian buys, but how can they get her to switch brands, try something new or accept something which she might find unpalatable, like privatised water, or changes to the national Health Service? Where are the chinks in her armour of value systems? Chinks that can be worked on to persuade her to buy something as insignificant as a new brand of margarine, or as important as the Government's policy on the poll tax?' The role of

5. EB, 105.
6. *The Listener*, 23 May 1989, 14.

the agency is critical, for while the advertiser as payer of the piper has the right to call the tune, he or she is very greatly dependent on the agent's professional skills.

THE MORALIST ASKETH

I mentioned earlier that the essential basis of modern moral interest in the business of advertising was laid down by the time advertising acquired its modern shape during the second half of the nineteenth century. That interest is at four levels. First, as a system of *information* advertisement is required to comply with the canons of truthfulness – to be legal, decent, honest and truthful, in the words of the Code of Advertising Standards for Ireland. Second as an instrument of *persuasion* it must respect human freedom and rationality. Third, as itself a key component in economies of capitalist configuration it is open to all the ethical questions which may be put to these systems, and a few more besides. And, fourth, as a 'tutor in the good life'[7] it transmits values, explicit and implicit, and its values must stand critical scrutiny.

The first two levels are touched on, and there are hints of the others, in a document which summarises Catholic Church teaching on advertising, a Pastoral Instruction on the Uses of the Media published in 1971.[8] Section 60 is central. 'If harmful or utterly useless goods are touted to the public, if false assertions are made about the goods for sale, if less admirable tendencies are exploited, those responsible for such advertising harm society and forfeit their good name and credibility. More than this, unremitting pressure to buy articles of luxury can arouse false wants that hurt both individuals and families by making them ignore what they really need. And those forms of advertising which, without shame, exploit the sexual instincts simply to make money or seek to penetrate into the subconscious recesses of the mind in a way that threatens the freedom of the individual, those forms of advertising must be shunned. It is therefore desirable that advertisers make definite rules for themselves lest their sales methods affront human dignity or harm the community.'

Of course the law of the land provides for the safeguarding of some of the values at issue here. Trade Description Acts, for example, prohibit advertisement in ways that are false or misleading. The law punishes defamation, and the publishing of what is indecent or obscene. In this country there are over sixty statutes and statutory instruments which bear upon advertising and its practices.

7. T. M. Garrett, S.J., *An Introduction to Some Ethical Problems of Modern American Advertising*, Rome 1961, p. 4.
8. *Communio et Progressio*. E. tr. Flannery (ed.), *Vatican Council II*, Vol. I, Dublin 1984.

A CODE OF PRACTICE

But the law is a crude instrument, and in many countries it has been found useful to supplement it by the kind of voluntary self-regulation alluded to in the Instruction. In Ireland an Advertising Standards Authority (ASAI) was set up in 1981, 'to promote and enforce the highest standards of advertising in all media'. The Authority has devised a 'Code of Advertising Standards'[9] which is administered through a Complaints Committee. The Board also oversees a pre-publication vetting service, to which an advertisement may be referred should there be a doubt about its conformity to the Code; and a continuous monitoring service helps track down contraventions which are not the subject of complaint.

The Code provides a standard for the guidance of advertisers, agencies and media, as well as for members of the public who may wish to make a complaint. It is frank about its connection with commercial self-interest: 'Unless advertisements are accepted and believed they cannot do the job for which they are designed' (Introduction par. 13). But it affirms also a sense of responsibility to the public, to colleagues and to competitors: 'Advertisers, advertising agencies and media recognize their responsibilities by not creating and not disseminating misleading, dishonest, unfair or offensive advertisements' (par. 14).

The content of the Code is worth a brief review here. Its basic principles are summarised in the statement that advertisements should be 'legal, decent, honest and truthful', and a series of general rules aim at promoting these objectives. Particular categories of advertisement (among them health claims, financial advertising and the advertisement of drink and tobacco) are the subject of special rules, and an addendum to the third edition deals with sexism.

Most of the general rules concern truthfulness in presentation, and these are introduced by the provision 'An advertisement should not mislead consumers about any matter likely to influence their attitude to the advertised product either by inaccuracy, ambiguity, exaggeration, omission or otherwise' (B 5.1). While the Introduction insists that the Code does not seek the role of censor in matters of taste or that of arbitrator between conflicting ideologies, the Code prescribes that 'Advertisements should contain nothing which, because of its failure to respect the standards of decency and propriety that are generally accepted in Ireland, is likely to cause either grave or widespread offence' (B 3.1). It is even more cautious in par. 3.2. 'Some advertisements which do not conflict with the preceding sub-paragraph may nonetheless be found distasteful and some people may object to them because they reflect or give expres-

9. Advertising Standards Authority for Ireland, 3rd edition 1989.

sion to attitudes or opinions not generally accepted. Advertisers are urged therefore to consider the effect any apparent disregard of such sensitivities may have upon their reputation and that of their product.'

Compliance with the Code is a condition of membership of the Authority, and responsibility for ensuring compliance rests in the first place with advertisers, agencies and the media. If a member does not agree to amend or withdraw an advertisement as instructed, or otherwise fails to comply with a directive, sanctions are imposed. The sanctions are listed as follows:

I Adverse publicity may be given in Case Reports.
II Advertising space or time can be withheld from the advertiser.
III The advertising agency's trading privileges may be withdrawn.
IV The consumer protection agencies may be notified.
V A member may be suspended or expelled by the Board.
VI A fine may be imposed by the Board.[10]

SEXISM

Conventional ethical criticism has long complained about the use of sexuality in advertising, on the basis of its 'indecency' or 'obscenity'. The Pastoral Instruction objects to 'exploitation of the sexual instinct'; as we shall see, moralists have been in any case especially critical of advertising's tendency to play upon the basic instincts. Some commentators have wished to avoid prudery – as for examle the author of the Catholic Encycopedia's entry on the ethics of advertising, who does not subscribe to 'any categorical rejection of the natural beauty of the human female as a legitimate means of attracting attention to a product or a service'[11] – a sentiment which will doubtless drive many readers to a fury.

For, of course, contemporary feminism has made an issue of the portrayal of women in advertising. It shares the more broadly based objection to the exloitation of sex, but it sees this as working especially against women. For a radical feminist such as Andrea Dworkin advertising is an instrument of male sexual dominance,[12]

10. A review of the operations of the Code is found in the annual Report published by the Authority, which also makes available summaries of cases and their outcomes. (These are usually reported in the newspapers.)

11. 1967 edition. Art. 'Advertising'.

12. 'Money is primary in the acquisition of sex and sex is primary in the making of money: it is tied into every industry through advertising (this car will bring you women, see that slinky thing draped over the hood), or items are eroticized in and of themselves because of what they cost. In the realm of money, sex and women are the same commodity. Wealth of any kind, to any degree, is an expression of male sexual power.' Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*, London 1981.

but even moderates are outraged by the degradation of women which is involved in their treatment by the advertising industry.

In this light it is interesting to look at the addendum to the third edition of the Irish code which I have already mentioned, for this deals with procedure relating to complaints concerning sexism. It says that such complaints are considered under Part B, 3, entitled 'Decency', the general provisions of which are here supplemented by specific norms. The leading principle is that 'An advertisement should neither conflict with the inherent equality between the sexes nor imply any derogatory judgment of either sex nor portray a man or woman or child in an offensive manner'. There is a formal deprecation of the portrayal of women 'in an objectionable or crude manner or irrelevant to the product advertised and merely to attract attention'. And there are detailed guidelines in regard to the avoidance of sexual stereotyping.

FRIENDLY PERSUASION

A code such as that of the ASAI is indeed useful in promoting a suitable standard in those matters which it covers. But its provisions have only limited relevance to the second level of ethical concern mentioned above, and none at all (unless very indirectly) to the third and fourth. The second level is that at which questions may be raised about the techniques which advertising employs in attempting to persuade the public. One of these has already been touched upon, that of playing upon basic human instincts, wishes or fears, and offering a specious fulfilment. Aldous Huxley has summarised the approach: 'Find some common desire, some widespread unconscious fear or anxiety; think out some way to relate this wish or fear to the product you have to sell; then build a bridge of verbal or pictorial symbols over which your customer can pass from fact to compensatory dream, and from the dream to the illusion that your product, when purchased, will make the dream come true'.[13]

And so, Huxley continues, we no longer buy oranges but vitality; buying a car, we buy prestige. The same point is made by Walter Seiler: 'The cosmetic manufacturers are not selling lanolin and witch hazel . . . they are selling *hope*. The perfumers are not selling a pleasant smell . . . they are selling *allure*; and the reason they are selling these things instead of their products is that women are willing to pay more for hope and allure than for lanolin and witch hazel'.[14]

At what I have called the second level of ethical concern the objection here is to the by-passing of rationality, and the engineer-

13. See *Brave New World Revisited,* New York 1958, p. 58ff.
14. Quoted in Garrett, *op. cit.,* p. 82.

ing of response on the basis of a motivation which may not even be recognized. It is not the real properties of the product which count, but a pretended relationship with happiness or health or various kinds of fulfilment. Real choice is precluded, for the consumer is literally misled. Of course, there is another level of ethical objection also: its vision of life, implied or explicit, is false.

This by-passing of rationality and subversion of freedom is even more marked in a technique which has been the subject of recurrent controversy since the 1950s, the technique known as 'subliminal advertising'. This term was coined by an American market researcher named James Vicary, who claimed that he had succeeded in influencing people through the insertion in a newsreel of a single frame which people had subconsciously registered. Vance Packard's *The Hidden Persuaders*[15] brought the technique and its applications to public notice, and something of a public scare was thereby occasioned. Although no hard evidence of its effectiveness appears to have been found it has continued to be a source of concern, and some codes have banned it explicitly.

A related issue at the second level of ethical concern, and merging with the third, it that of the creation of artificial wants. Clever advertising can make us want, say, a video-camera – perhaps by linking its possession to a natural interest in observing the high points of our children's growth. Or we are brought to want a second car, stimulated by a sense of the freedom which it would give a spouse, or of its potential as symbol of prestige. There are two problems here: a need is contrived by manipulation of minds, feelings and freedom, and we are distracted from our real wants. Children go hungry while a parent indulges a luxury hobby, a society prefers to create an *embarras* of 'goods' to improving its health care.

Nor is the problem confined to individuals or within societies, as the Pastoral Instruction makes plain: 'It is true that a judicious use of advertising can stimulate developing countries to improve their standard of living. But serious harm can be done them if advertising and commercial pressure become so irresponsible that communities seek to rise from poverty to a reasonable standard of living are persuaded to seek this progress by satisfying wants that have been created artificially. The result of this is that they waste their resources and neglect their very needs, and genuine development falls behind' (par. 61).

IT PAYS TO ADVERTISE

And so we are at the third level of ethical concern, for the business of advertising is part now of an economic system whose values it

15. Penguin 1957.

both reflects and promotes. That system requires a rapid consumption of commodities, and advertising has a key role in ensuring that this takes place. If it fulfilled this role merely by informing the public of the availability of goods and services our ethical worries might remain at the first level. But we have seen that it must also try to *persuade*. One reason for this is that the system exhibits also an inherent competitiveness (I must persuade you to buy my brand rather than that of my rival). But a more basic reason is that large-scale production methods result in a vast output, and the system requires that this be marketed to the fullest possible extent. And so people must be got to buy things even when they do not really need them, and markets must be created by tapping people's deepest hopes and fears. The second level of ethical concern makes us anxious about the techniques by which this is done, the third makes us question the system which requires it.

This is not the place to attempt a critique of the kinds of economic system in which advertising thrives; one is aware also, of course, of the kind of defence which, granted the systems, advertising is able to make. In a general way, though, it must be clear that at this third level of moral concern a Christian conscience can scarcely remain easy with the role which advertising has come to lay. It is clear too that, important as the issues at the first two levels are, they are secondary beside the question of the fundamental justice of the system of which advertising is so central a part.[16]

AND HOW SHOULD I BEGIN?

More basic still, of course, is fourth level of our concern, for this has to do with the question of our view of life and the values which we wish to affirm and transmit. Advertising is a symbol-system which is at least partly expressive of the kind we are, and all our hopes and fears. The advertiser picks his symbols for their power to resonate with us, and it is the resonance which enables him to touch and move us. But when he moves us we are altered; the symbol also helps to change us. What do we, as individuals or societies really value, considering that an advertiser can make us prefer property development to the provision of a community social centre or a shelter for the homeless? And what, making such choices over and over again, shall we in the end value? – what shall we *become*?

Societies of Christian inspiration profess a regard for truthfulness, and this enjoins on us a vigilance at the first level of ethical concern with which this article has, however sketchily, dealt. Law and self-regulation among practitioners are important

16. At this level also belong such important questions as the freedom of the media in view of sponsorship by advertisers, monopoly of advertising by large concerns, and the effect of advertising on prices.

elements in the effective expression of this vigilance, but so is an education of us consumers. The same holds for the second level: awareness and understanding of the advertiser's techniques are the best antidote to their misuse. Coping with the third level is more complex, for we are all part of 'the system'. I may be aware of the damage done by the arousing of false wants in aid of my society's economy, but my interest in changing this way of doing things is minimal if the system benefits me. And if we are thus inhibited in coping with the questions which are generated at this level of concern, what chance have we with the fourth? Yet face them all we must – if we say we are Christian and if our world is to remain human.

That no harm may come . . .

Forgive me Lord for thinking years ago that to serve you as a priest unmarried was service of a higher, better kind;

That love, the greatest of your gifts to man, was best sublimated, not expressed;

That marriage, with responsibility for family life, was a lower form of priestly service.

And now that years have passed, help me to bear the burden of the consequence, the burden of loving and longing to love more, yet bound by no gesture to indicate that love to those beloved.

Perhaps in some mysterious way, this means that the whole world can be my family, the object of my love.

But if this be what your loving providence demands, give me that love which is sensitive, compassionate, controlled, the kind of love, if such exists, that transcends the nature you have given me, reaching a plane which I do not, cannot, fully comprehend.

So that amidst the conventions, customs of this world you made and love and customs and conventions so often artificial – no harm may come from anything I do or don't do to those I love. But grant, good Lord, that from all contacts with the world, my family, all blessings possible may flow upon them and upon me.

—EDWARD MAYCOCK, 1907-72, quoted in *Oxford Book of Prayers* (ed. G. Appleton, O.U.P.), p. 82.